

Choice and inspiration: content for audio and multimedia guiding systems

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ABSTRACT

Audio and multimedia guiding systems, as many other technological applications, can be seen not as mere information transmitters, but as a communication medium that has the power to affect one's perception of the surrounding reality. Thus, they can contribute significantly to the overall experience of a visit in a museum or site of cultural significance. But what do we, on behalf of a cultural institution, want visitors to learn by using them?

Not having quite replaced the face-to-face guiding, which remains addressed to group visits, the guiding systems, with the introduction of PDAs particularly, gain ground and gradually change their aims and content in order not just to describe artifacts anymore but to provide contextual information and initiative for learning and enjoyment.

We will first attempt to define the relation between the medium and its content by evaluating the pros and cons of face-to face, audio and multimedia guided visits, with the help of communications and social theory and through our personal experience in the concept, development and evaluation of relevant applications.

We will then focus on discussing the variety of content in guiding systems according to case, in archaeological, historical and open air museums, and in both permanent and temporary exhibitions. Indeed, the very same hardware may lead to a wide range of content, according to different exhibitional and thematic requirements and depending upon the creators' choice and inspiration. We will use as case studies our own relevant work: the contextual audio guides in the temporary exhibition "Byzantine Hours: Everyday life in Byzantium", the flexible audio or multimedia guidance in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Byzantine Culture, the multimedia exhibitional supplement of the Museum of the city of Thessaloniki, the acoustic literary texts suggested for the forthcoming re-exhibition of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle and the integrated multimedia guiding system suggested in the site and museum of Ouranoupolis and the historical-folklore "Argentis" Collection in the museum of Chios.

1. INTRODUCTION

Audio and multimedia guiding systems through their interactivity might offer new opportunities for supporting cultural approaches and interpretive development. The paper particularly seeks to highlight the role of new media in the context of heritage interpretation and the development of a regional interpretive strategy.

2. RELATED SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION THEORIES

It is useful to have in mind some social and communication theories when creating the content of a guiding system to complement the visit in a museum or archaeological site.

2.1 MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TO A MASS AUDIENCE

The mode of a museum audience experience is the one of a mass audience: communication is mediated; the medium being the exhibition itself, there is a medium rate of "ceremony" involved in the visit and a variable rate of audience attention, in which low involvement, being a passive watcher, does not necessarily imply low attention (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p. 43-57).

2.2 MEDIATED QUASI-INTERACTION

Guiding systems, when used, inevitably accelerate the mediated quasi-interaction (Giddens, 1997, p. 379-381) of a museum with its audience: a one-way, monological form of communication, extensively available in time, oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients.

2.3 TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Last, having in mind what Marshall McLuhan generally professes – that the medium does not simply present a picture of the world to the audience, it fundamentally alters the way people think about the world – the experience and content of a museum visit may alter significantly by the addition of technological devices such as guiding systems.

3. GROUPING THE CASE STUDIES BY TYPE OF INFORMATION

3.1 THE GROUPS

In our attempt to examine the use of guiding systems in museum exhibitions, several case studies of our own work experience have been grouped here by type of information provided in the systems, excluding the so far standard use for object description:

- a) Based on object description, contextual information is provided
- b) Background information on the era's history and art
- c) Exhibitional supplement integrated in the audiovisual applications of the museum
- d) Acoustic literary "representations" aiming at the emotional involvement of the visitor
- e) *En route* of an archaeological promenade, contextual information is provided for the wider area
- f) Making best use of the city's view from the top of a monument, historical information is provided

3.2 GROUP A: BASED ON OBJECT DESCRIPTION, CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION IS PROVIDED

A step ahead object description is to use the object as the starting point in order to tell a story about its context. In this case, the object is seen as an example of its kind and as evidence of the time that created and used it.

3.2.1 "EVERYDAY LIFE IN BYZANTIUM"

This was the way exhibitors interpreted the objects on display in the temporary exhibition "Everyday life in Byzantium", which was organised by the Museum of Byzantine Culture and was presented from October 2001 to March 2002 in the White Tower, in Thessaloniki, as part of the "Byzantine Hours" multi-venue of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. The same interpretation viewpoint was kept in the concept of the audio guide content, developed and edited by Katerina Nikolaidou. Even valuable and well-known byzantine works of art, that were presented in the exhibition on loan from great european and american museums, were seen as the starting point to talk about their function and the customs of the time.

3.3 GROUP B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ERA'S HISTORY AND ART

3.3.1 THE OURANOUPOLIS TOWER

In the case-study of Ouranoupolis Tower the multimedia guiding system suggested as an additional interpretive tool in the permanent exhibition "Ouranoupolis and the Lochs" would provide the opportunity not only to enrich one's knowledge with more information, but to contextualize and manage a great amount of special elements drawn by the archive.

The Ouranoupoli's tower was the main building (cluster of buildings) of the metochion Prosfori of the monastery Vatopediou of Mount Athos and is one of the biggest and most important of the towers in Chalkidiki (Papaggelos, 1989). It constitutes of three buildings, the main tower, the "mparmpaka" which is essentially the yard of the tower and the "arsana". The tower dates in Byzantine times. Funded by the European Union, the Ouranoupoli's tower is about to open as a museum organised by the 10th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities and in particular by the staff team: the director Dr Tavlakis, the museologist Archontia Polyzoudi and the architect Ploutarchos Theocharidis.

At the beginning of the 20th century lived in the tower families, refugees expelled from Asia Minor, and the Lochs, an Australian couple who helped at the most to the development of the area by creating a manufacture of rugs. These rugs became famous all over the world and gained a lot of prizes for their quality and their originality of using natural only elements.

The purposes of implementing a guiding system is to enhance visitor's knowledge and communicate contextual information on the whole process of manufacturing and on its social and economic implications on the region development. That contextualised information could function not only as an interpretive tool but at the same time as impulse of raising the interest for the management of local cultural heritage.

3.3.2 THE HISTORICAL-FOLKLOR MUSEUM OF CHIOS

At the same level, in the permanent exhibition of "Argenti's" Collection in the historical-folklor museum of Chios (Public Korai's Library) the great number of significant objects which can not be all displayed could create a very interesting data base providing contextual information on the already displayed objects. By that way, the visitor through displayed historical and topographical charts from 17th to 19th century could be introduced with the help of contextual information to events related to the history of the island.

Furthermore, the collection of porcelain statuettes, unique of its kind, and of small paintings depicting persons dressed in traditional costumes is presented both exhibitionally and in terms of the audio guide content in a way that gives the opportunity to the public to discover and enjoy the interrelationships, context and atmosphere of the era in terms of the dressing code subjected to a more sociological framework. The system's content was edited by the museologist responsible for the exhibition's overall concept and development, Archontia Polyzoudi.

3.3.3 THE MUSEUM OF BYZANTINE CULTURE

Very close to the above-mentioned concept of providing contextual information through the display of archaeological objects lies the "storytelling" approach of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Byzantine Culture. Objects are the exhibition's "aesthetic text" that combines with written texts and illustrations in order to provide a picture of the byzantine culture. The problem in developing the content of the guiding systems was that the same narrated text would be included in both audio and multimedia guides, between which the visitor may choose. This was a restriction instituted by the project financier, the Organisation for the Promotion of Hellenic Culture. This troubled the content editors, Chondrogiannis Stamatis and Katerina Nikolaidou, in trying to present comprehensively for the audio version all information on subjects which are best described with the aid of visual material. As a result, subjects requiring illustrative backup were completely left out. They were replaced by general information that was not provided by the exhibition's written texts, such as extensive information on byzantine history, as well as on crafts, religion and mentality of the time.

3.4 GROUP C: EXHIBITIONAL SUPPLEMENT INTEGRATED IN THE AUDIOVISUAL APPLICATIONS OF THE MUSEUM

In all the above cases, the use of guiding systems during the visit is optional, aiming in providing additional information. However, these systems may alternatively function as an integral part of the exhibition, by including, for example, in their content the sound of the exhibition's projections, which is particularly useful in the case of bilingual exhibitions.

3.4.1 THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF THESSALONIKI

This is how a multimedia guiding system was suggested to integrate the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the city of Thessaloniki, which will be housed in the White Tower, the city's monument – symbol, and is due to open in late 2006. The exhibition is funded by the European Union and is organised by the Museum of Byzantine Culture. The exhibition concept and development was prepared by a staff team of the latter museum: the director Dr Anastasia Tourta, the archaeologists Dimitris Nalpantis and Georgia Papazotou, the museologist Katerina Nikolaidou and the architects Nikolaos Vranikas and Anastasia Karadimitriou.

3.5 GROUP D: ACOUSTIC LITERARY "REPRESENTATIONS" AIMING AT THE EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT OF THE VISITOR

A different approach to the content of audio guides is to use the medium in order to present acoustic literary "representations", that is, extracts of literary texts, which aim at the emotional involvement of the visitor. Well-selected literary texts may draw a picture of the past more vividly than any museum text could.

3.5.1 THE MUSEUM OF MACEDONIAN STRUGGLE

This idea was suggested for the re-exhibition of the Museum of Macedonian Struggle in Thessaloniki. The museum is about the troubled period of 1904 to 1908, the times that immediately followed the national identity awakening in Macedonia and the struggle between Greeks and Bulgarians on the one hand, and of both on the other against the ottoman occupancy in the area. Part of the old exhibition will be kept intact, as decided by the trustees: that is, four dioramas with scene representations designed in the early 1980ies by the scenographer Anemogiannis. The visit to these dioramas, as well and to other parts of the new exhibition, was suggested to be enhanced by the narration of extracts from two books that deal with the subject, both by the well-known novelist Penelope Delta, in the museological proposal for the re-exhibition by Katerina Nikolaidou.

3.5.2 "OURANOUPOLIS AND THE LOCHS"

In the same frame of mind, one of the rooms dedicated to the exhibition "Ouranoupolis and the Lochs" is represented as it was when the Lochs lived in the tower. Aiming at the emotional involvement of the visitor extracts from the poems who wrote Joice Loch could be narrated. These poems have been written during her residence in the tower and describe her

feelings about the monument and the people within an atmosphere endowed of smells and noises. So, the place is getting “alive” and the visitor captures and experiences the moments that people lived there at the beginning of 20th century.

3.6 GROUP E: EN ROUTE OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROMENADE, CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION IS PROVIDED FOR THE WIDER AREA

An archaeological promenade in the countryside is always enjoyable and has a lot of information to communicate. Making use of multimedia guiding systems, the visitor is encouraged to know more about the visited monuments in terms of their multiple uses and re-uses until modern times, to acquire contextual information for the wider area.

3.6.1 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROMENADE IN OURANOUPOLIS

This is the case of a project called “archaeological promenade” run by the 10th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities by grouping the documented monuments in Ouranoupolis, restoring them and interpreting them linked to each other to an enhancement of the knowledge of local history.

3.7 GROUP F: MAKING BEST USE OF THE CITY’S VIEW FROM THE TOP OF A MONUMENT, HISTORICAL INFORMATION IS PROVIDED

3.7.1 THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF THESSALONIKI

Last, a case of combining open-air and museum function of a multimedia guide was suggested for the previously mentioned Museum of the city of Thessaloniki, when the visitor ends up at the White Tower’s bastions. On each battlement, the panoramic view was decided by the already mentioned group of museum professionals to be supported either by topographic information on earlier phases of the city’s development, or by information on historical events related to certain parts of the city.

4. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion of all the above, one may say that guiding systems could have many different uses, depending either upon specific exhibitional requirements or upon the exhibitors’ own choices and inspiration.

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